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SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

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SUBJECT: MALDIVES SET TO VOTE OCTOBER 8 IN FIRST ROUND OF
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

REF: A. COLOMBO 880
[1](#)B. COLOMBO 854

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On September 22, the Elections Commission declared six candidates eligible to stand in Maldives' first-ever multi-party Presidential election. Five opponents are challenging President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom of the ruling DRP: the Maldives Democratic Party's Mohamed Nasheed ("Anni"); Maldives' richest man, Gasim Ibrahim of the newly-created Republican Party; the Social Liberal Party (SLP) candidate Ibrahim Ismail ("Ibra"); an independent candidate, former Attorney General Hassan Saeed and Islamic Democratic Party (IDP) leader Umar Naseer. The Supreme Court rejected two challenges to President Gayoom's candidacy on October 2, as well as a challenge to Nasheed's right to contest. With that, the way is clear for all six to compete in the first round of voting scheduled for October 8. If no candidate secures over 50%, a runoff between the top two finishers will take place about ten days later. Representatives of the main parties say that fears of a looming "constitutional void" if voting is not completed by the deadline of October 10 are overstated. In the absence of published polls, it is difficult to assess the state of the race. MDP representatives are increasingly confident of their chances of unseating Gayoom. Gayoom is relying on his 30-year incumbency, especially his network of island and atoll chiefs, to deliver victory. Politicians generally seem bullish about Maldives' prospects for holding its first democratic, multi-candidate Presidential election. The public is highly motivated; however, only 25% of voters say they expect polling to be free and fair. End summary.

Opposition Walks Out as Supreme Court Sworn In

[1](#)2. (U) On September 18, opposition members walked out of the Majlis in protest as the President's DRP pushed through its five nominations to the Supreme Court. The judges will form an interim Supreme Court until a permanent court can be established following parliamentary elections next year. The opposition complained that they had inadequate time to scrutinize the nominees. Information Minister Nasheed expressed disappointment that none of the judges had a

background in common law. Social Liberal Party Presidential Candidate Ibrahim Ismail ("Ibra") echoed this concern, complaining that only one of the judges has an education in a field other than Shari'a law. MDP sources claim that President Gayoom's strong-arm tactics in filling the bench were primarily aimed at ensuring that his candidacy would be allowed to go forward.

Court Rejects Challenge to Gayoom

13. (SBU) On October 2, the Supreme Court ruled against a legal challenge to Gayoom's candidacy filed by Social Liberal Party candidate Ibra. Ibra had contended that Gayoom could not be eligible to run again after serving six terms. (The new Constitution sets a two-term limit, but the Court agreed with the argument that Gayoom's terms under the old Constitution did not count.) The Court also dismissed a complaint against Gayoom by the moderate Islamist party Adhaalath, which claimed that Gayoom is not a Sunni Muslim (a constitutional requirement for holding office) because of his supposed heretical views. Finally, the Supreme Court sustained the Criminal Court's and Election Commission's earlier findings that Anni's 2001 conviction for theft (on what are generally considered trumped-up charges) did not constitute a crime under Shari'a law. A contrary finding would have rendered Anni ineligible.

Who Knows Who's on First?

COLOMBO 00000917 002 OF 004

14. (SBU) In the absence of published polling data, it is difficult to hard to determine where Gayoom stands in relation to his opponents. MDP representatives say they are increasingly confident, while President Gayoom is relying on the power of his 30-year incumbency. We expect no candidate will receive 50% of the vote, forcing a second round runoff between the top two finishers. Of the rest of the field, only independent Hassan Saeed (the former Attorney General) and Qasim Ibrahim (former Finance Minister and reputedly Maldives' wealthiest man) have a realistic chance to get through to the second round. The MDP believes that much of the anti-Gayoom vote will consolidate behind Anni if he and the incumbent make the runoff. However, the MDP says their private polling data shows Anni in first place, followed by former Attorney General Hassan Saeed - not Gayoom. In a sign of the opposition's increasing confidence of unseating Gayoom, Anni and Saeed are starting to concentrate more of their fire on each other. Gayoom is banking on his network of island and atoll chiefs, who all owe their appointments to him, to bring in enough votes. (In fact, he shuffled some atoll chiefs, and brought in six new ones, on September 30 - barely a week before the vote.) In the more remote islands, Gayoom's appointees may be able to exert enough pressure to sway some votes. The Republican Party is relying on Qasim's name recognition, large employee base, and personal fortune to propel him into a second round. Rumors are rampant, however, that the wealthiest candidate, Qasim, is spending money freely in an attempt to buy votes. The other candidates are rather gleefully reminding voters that their ballots are secret.

(SBU) THE CANDIDATES AND THEIR RUNNING MATES

15. Dhivehi Raiyyathunge Party (DRP) leader Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, 71, has served six terms as President. He now faces his first multi-candidate election. Educated at Royal College, Colombo, he has a Bachelor's in Islamic Shari'a and Civil Law from Al-Azhar University, Egypt, and a Master's in Shari'a from the same institution.

Gayoom's running mate Ahmed Thasmeen Ali, born in 1967, is the current Minister for Atolls Development. Previously, as

Home Affairs Minister, he introduced important reform measures to Maldives' relatively new police service. He holds a BA in Economics from the University of Warwick, UK and a Master's in Political Science from American University, Cairo.

Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) leader Mohamed Nasheed (Anni) is a former member of Parliament and long-time critic of Gayoom's regime. He has been sentenced to prison several times. In 1991, Amnesty International named him a Prisoner of Conscience. Nasheed left Maldives in 2003 to found the MDP, along with Mohamed Latheef, in exile in Sri Lanka and the UK. The British government granted him political asylum in 2004. Nasheed returned to Male in April 2005.

Anni's running mate, Dr. Mohamed Waheed Hassan Manik is the leader of the newly-formed National Alliance Party. Waheed was one of the earliest to oppose Gayoom's government. The first Maldivian to receive a PhD (from Stanford), Waheed has spent years outside the country during his career with UNICEF. He has had an uneven relationship with the MDP, heavily involved in the party in 2005, but resigning in 2007 after describing the party as "militant."

Independent candidate Hassan Saeed of the "New Maldives" movement was educated in Malaysia and received his PhD from the University of Queensland, Australia. Saeed had served as the Chief Judge of the Criminal Court before becoming Attorney General under Gayoom. Saeed broke with Gayoom in

COLOMBO 00000917 003 OF 004

2007 and left the government along with other reform-minded DRP ministers.

Saeed's running mate and "New Maldives" partner, former Foreign Minister Ahmed Shaheed, studied at the University of Aberystwyth, UK and obtained a PhD in International Relations from the University of Queensland. When Shaheed resigned as Foreign Minister, he said "a conservative old guard within the parliament and cabinet" were resisting reform.

The candidate of the Republican (Jumhooree) party, Qasim Ibrahim, is a billionaire businessman and former Finance Minister under Gayoom, resigning in July 2008 to run for President. Qasim began his career as a government hospital clerk. His Villa companies are active in many sectors, including tourism resorts and shipping. Qasim has served in a number of other important posts in government and industry, including as President of the SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Qasim also has the backing of the Islamist Adhaalath (Justice) Party, which decided not to run its own candidate.

Qasim's running mate Ahmed Ali Sawad, 35, a relative unknown (the campaign calls him "untainted"), had spent 14 years outside Maldives. He studied at the University of Bangalore law school and worked as a journalist for the Times of India. He is currently pursuing a PhD in human rights law from the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand.

Social Liberal Party (SLP) leader Ibrahim Ismail (Ibra), one of the principal architects of the new Constitution, has used his candidacy to highlight procedural and constitutional question issues and ways in which Maldives is falling short of democratic standards. Ibra completed his secondary education at Majeediyya school and the Science Education Center in Male and obtained a Bachelor's and Master's (in Education Administration) from the University of Canberra.

Ibra's running mate Fathimath Nahid Shakir, the only woman on the ballot, has a Master's in education from the University of Reading, UK, and twenty years' experience in the education sector.

Islamic Democratic Party candidate Umar Naseer, a former policeman and member of the Majlis, studied at the University

of Colombo and maintains ties to Sri Lanka. Naseer runs as a law-and-order hardliner and has called for rigid enforcement of penalties prescribed by Shari'a law, including the death penalty for drug traffickers and murderers. Some question his credentials as an Islamist, considering him an opportunist.

Naseer's running mate Ahmed Rizwee, another newcomer to politics, is a former member of the National Defense Force. According to Naseer, he has held managerial positions in several companies.

16. (SBU) COMMENT: It is clear that a second round, if necessary, will fall after the constitutional deadline of October 10 for voting to be complete. However, no party, save the SLP, has raised serious objections to the potential for a brief period of "constitutional void". While it is legally messy, most observers have concluded that there is no reason the Election Commission and Supreme Court could not administer and adjudicate a second round outside the constitutionally minimal timeframe. We have seen no indication that this would cause widespread public protest or otherwise call into question the conduct of the election -- as long as it is perceived to be free and fair. Given the importance of this election for Maldives' future democratic development, Embassy is deploying three officers, as part of a larger EU-led mission, to assist with election observation. We plan to do the same for the second round, if, as we

COLOMBO 00000917 004 OF 004

expect, a runoff is necessary.
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